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# The Saviour's rest and the Sabbath

By SAMUELE BACCHIOCCHI

## The Sabbath example and teaching of Jesus provided for those young Christian communities a new meaning to and manner of observing the Sabbath.

This article represents a brief synopsis of a paper presented to the Society of Biblical Literature. The full text of the paper was published in *Andrews University Seminary Studies*. A short analysis of Matthew 11:28-30 is also found in the book *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness* (Rome, 1980), pp. 156-164.

*"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light"* (Matt. 11:28-30).\*

What kind of "rest" does Christ offer in this well-known passage? Did Jesus promise His followers a shorter workweek with more time off for rest and recreation?

I believe that the rest promised by Christ fulfilled the Messianic rest typified by the Old Testament Sabbath. This interpretation has important implications regarding the significance of Sabbathkeeping for the early Christian community as well as for our personal lives.

The passage containing Jesus' offer of rest comes between several accounts of rejection. At the very time when Jesus was experiencing unusual opposition and misunderstanding, He disclosed His Messianic identity by offering rest to His followers.

### The immediate context

To grasp the significance of the "rest" saying, let us examine its immediate context. Matthew 11:25-30 is a "thanksgiving hymn" consisting of three strophes (stanzas). The first strophe (verses 25, 26) contains Christ's prayer of thanksgiving for God's willingness to reveal His Messiahship not to "the wise and understanding," such as scribes and Pharisees, but to "the simple" (N.E.B.), such as His disciples.

The second strophe explains how this revelation occurs, namely, from the Father through the Son: "All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (verse 27). Several scholars view this statement as a Messianic self-disclosure of Jesus,<sup>1</sup> since *Son* represents in the Synoptic Gospels the Christian equivalent of the Jewish term *Messiah*.

\* Unless otherwise noted, the Scripture quotations in this article are from the Revised Standard Version.

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At moments of supreme revelation, such as His baptism and transfiguration, the voice from heaven addressed Jesus not as Christ but as "my Son, my Beloved" (chaps. 3:17; 17:5, N.E.B.). Peter's confession of Christ, which in Mark 8:29 reads "You are the Christ," is expanded in Matthew to read "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (chap. 16:16). Indications such as these<sup>2</sup> show that Jesus, by proclaiming Himself to be the Son who knows and reveals the Father, asserted His Messianic claim.

What connection exists between Jesus' Messianic self-disclosure (verses 25-27) and His offer of rest (verses 28-30)? The connection appears in the Messianic theme that links the three strophes. The structure of the passage suggests that Jesus not only revealed (first strophe—verses 25, 26) and proclaimed (second strophe—verse 27) His Messiahship, but also offered the Messianic rest typified by the Sabbath (third strophe—verses 28-30). A Messianic interpretation of the Sabbath rest in Old Testament times supports this view. The weekly Sabbath rest experience served to nourish the hope of Hebrew believers for both a national and Messianic rest.<sup>3</sup>

Jewish literature provides ample evidences of a Messianic understanding of the Sabbath rest. For example, in the Jewish apocalyptic work known as 2 Baruch (from the latter half of the first century A.D.), the author describes the time of the Messiah by saying: "And it shall come to pass, when He has brought low everything that is in the world, and has sat down in peace for the age on the throne of His kingdom, that joy shall then be revealed, and rest shall appear."<sup>4</sup>

## Two Sabbath incidents clarify the relationship between the Saviour's rest and the Sabbath.

Similarly, in the Testament of Dan (about 110-70 B.C.), the Messiah is expected to "give to them that call upon him eternal peace. And the saints shall rest in Eden."<sup>5</sup>

Rabbinic literature also provides numerous examples in which the Sabbath rest signifies the Messianic age, sometimes referred to as the "seventh age," the "age to come," the "time that is come." For example, *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* says: "The Holy One, blessed be He, created seven ages, and of them all He chose the seventh age only; the six ages are for the going in and coming out (of God's creatures), for war and peace. The seventh age is wholly Sabbath and rest in the life everlasting."<sup>6</sup> The Mishnah (Tamid) comments on the title of Psalm 92, *A Psalm: A Song for the Sabbath Day*, saying, "A song for the time that is to come, for the day that shall be all Sabbath and rest in the life everlasting."<sup>7</sup>

This Messianic understanding of the Sabbath rest finds an echo in Hebrews, which explains that the Sabbath rest offered at Creation (chap. 4:4) was not exhausted when the Israelites under Joshua found a resting place in Canaan (verse 8), but has fully dawned with the coming of Jesus Christ (see verse 9). By believing in Christ, God's people can at last experience ("enter"—verses 3, 10, 11) God's rest promised "on the seventh-day" of Creation (verse 4).

This view of the Sabbath suggests that the rest promised by Jesus fulfills the expected Messianic rest typified by the Old Testament Sabbath. This interpretation fits not only the immediate context but also the scheme of the gospel, in which significant events of Jesus' life become the fulfillment of Old Testament Messianic prophecies.<sup>8</sup>

The context suggests, then, that Christ, by offering His rest immediately after his Messianic disclosure, intended to substantiate His Messianic claim by offering what the Messiah was expected to bring, namely, the peace and rest typified by the Sabbath. Luke provides a somewhat similar parallel in his account of the Nazareth address (Luke 4:16-21). Here Jesus announces His Messianic program by quoting a passage from Isaiah 61:1, 2 (and chap. 58:6), which describes by means of the imagery of the Sabbath year the liberation that the Servant of the Lord would bring to His people. It would seem that as in Luke 4:16-21 Jesus inaugurates His public ministry by affirming it to be the fulfillment of the Messianic liberation nourished by the vision of the Sabbath years (see verse 21),<sup>9</sup> so in Matthew 11:25-30 He discloses for the first time His Messiahship by offering the rest typified by the Sabbath.

Matthew indicates the connection between Jesus' rest and the Sabbath by placing the former (verses 28-30) in the context of two Sabbath episodes (chap. 12:1-14). The two are connected, as noted by several scholars,<sup>10</sup> not only *structurally* but also *temporally* by the phrase "at that time" (verse 1). The time referred to is a Sabbath day when Jesus and the disciples went through a field. That Christ offered His rest on a Sabbath day suggests the two are linked together not only *temporally* but *theologically*, as indicated by the two Sabbath episodes that explain how the Messianic rest relates to the Sabbath.

Before examining the latter point, consider the formula for rest offered by Christ: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me . . . , and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." How can a yoke be easy and give rest? *Yoke* commonly expressed subordination and loyalty to God, especially through obedience to His law (see Jer. 5:5; 2:20; Acts 15:10; Gal. 5:1). Rabbis often spoke of "the yoke of the Torah," "the yoke of the commandments."<sup>11</sup>

The yoke offered by Christ represents not a commitment to a new set of *principles* (new Torah), but dedication to a *Person*, the true interpreter and fulfiller of the Law and the Prophets.

In Matthew the emphasis on the Person is self-evident: "Come to *me*. . . . Take *my* yoke . . . , and learn from *me*." "I will give you rest." Moreover, the parallel structure of verses 28 and 29 indicates that taking the yoke of Jesus means "come to" and "learn from" Him; that is, personally accept Jesus as Messiah. Such acceptance becomes an easy



and light yoke, not because Jesus weakens the demands of the law (cf. chap. 5:20), but because He offers the rest of Messianic redemption to which the law and, more specifically, the Sabbath had always pointed.

Two Sabbath incidents, linked structurally and temporally to the easy yoke and rest offered by Christ, clarify the relationship between the Saviour's rest and the Sabbath. In the first story—the disciples plucking heads of grain on a Sabbath (chap. 12:1-8)—Jesus' rest is redemption-rest, as seen in His appeal to the priests who worked on the Sabbath in the Temple and yet were "guiltless" (verse 5; cf. Num. 28:9, 10; Lev. 24:8, 9).

Why were the priests guiltless? Because they took another day off during the week? No. The absence of such a provision constitutes a direct challenge to the "one day in seven" argument. Writing in a newly released major symposium on the Sabbath-Sunday subject, Prof. Donald Carson comments: "If the Old Testament principle were really 'one day in seven for worship and rest' instead of 'the seventh day for worship and rest,' we might have expected Old Testament legislation to prescribe some other day off for the priests. The lack of such confirms the importance in Old Testament thought of the *seventh* day, as opposed to the mere one-in-seven principle so greatly relied upon by those who wish to see in Sunday the precise New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament Sabbath."<sup>12</sup>

The priests remained innocent because of the redemptive nature of their Sabbath services, designed to provide physical and spiritual release.<sup>13</sup> Intensification of the Temple

services and sacrifices on the Sabbath pointed to the special release from sin and guilt offered on that day. Christ found in the redemptive work performed by the priests on the Sabbath justification for His own Sabbath ministry, which He viewed as "something greater than the temple" (Matt. 12:6). In other words, the redemption offered *typologically* through the Temple services and sacrifices performed by the priests was now being provided *realistically* through the saving

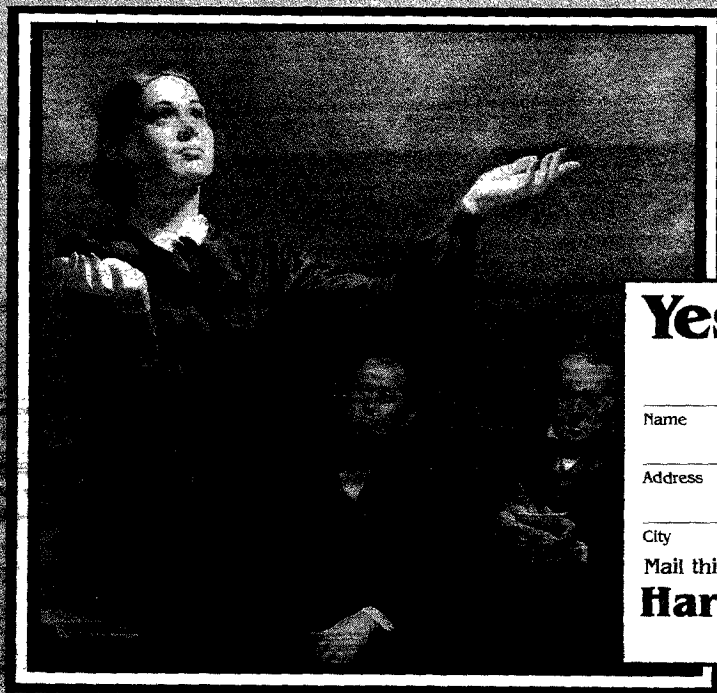
## Hebrews explains that the Sabbath rest offered at Creation has fully dawned with the coming of Jesus Christ.

mission of the Son of man, the Messiah. Just as the priests stood guiltless when performing their Sabbath services in the Temple, so did Jesus' disciples in serving the One greater than the Temple.

This redemptive function of the Sabbath may appear also where Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6: "If you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless" (Matt. 12:7). The disciples were guiltless because the Sabbath commandment called for not merely sacrifice (a Godward-directed and outward religious duty), but also mercy (a manward-directed attitude of compassion motivated by God's redeeming mercy).

In this context Jesus proclaimed His lordship over the

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Sabbath: "For the Son of man is lord of the sabbath" (verse 8). That Christ's lordship over the Sabbath derives from His being "greater than the temple" and from divine mercy suggests that this lordship is determined by His Messianic fulfillment of the redemption and mercy typified by the Temple and the Sabbath. The Messianic rest (chap. 11:28, 29) and lordship over the Sabbath (chap. 12:8) are connected by the Messianic redemption prefigured by the Sabbath.

The healing of the man with a withered hand (verses 9-13) follows as a demonstration of Jesus' lordship over the Sabbath, shown by offering on that day Messianic healing. All of the seven Sabbath healings were performed by Christ for chronically sick persons. They demonstrate how Jesus fulfilled messianic expectations nourished by the celebration of the Sabbath. This particular miracle "pictures Jesus performing a Messianic healing on that day. . . . [Is this not part and parcel of Matthew's fulfillment motifs?] The gospel rest to which the Sabbath had always pointed was now dawning."<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusions and implications

We conclude from this brief study that the rest offered by Jesus (chap. 11:28-30) represents the fulfillment of the Messianic rest typified by the Old Testament Sabbath. The two Sabbath episodes in Matthew linked to Jesus' offer of rest provide an interpretation of the nature of such rest. The first (plucking off heads of grain) qualifies the Saviour's rest as Messianic *redemption* through its references to mercy and Sabbath services performed by priests in the Temple. The second (man with a withered hand) interprets Jesus' rest as Messianic *restoration* through the example of Sabbath rescue of a sheep and healing of a sick man.

Did Matthew view the Sabbath as no longer to be observed because Jesus had fulfilled its Messianic typology, or as still to be observed in the light of its Messianic fulfillment? Its observance is presupposed in several clarifications given by Matthew. For example, in chapter 12:1, Matthew explains that "his disciples were hungry." The Evangelist's explanation that the disciples did not carelessly break the Sabbath suggests that, as Gerhard Barth writes, "in Matthew's congregation the Sabbath was still kept, but not in the same strict sense as in the rabbinate."<sup>15</sup>

Positive principles of Sabbath behavior ("So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath" [verse 12]) presuppose that the Matthean congregation observed the Sabbath, though in a new perspective—as a time to show "mercy" (verse 7) and to do "good" (verse 12). In Matthew 24:20 the Sabbath is mentioned as a day unfavorable to flight by Christians from Jerusalem. That Matthew retains the phrase "neither on the sabbath" (K.J.V.) "is sufficient proof of the high regard in which they held the Sabbath."<sup>16</sup>

The value of these testimonies by Matthew (and by other New Testament writers) has been ignored by some who have attempted to negate the validity of Sabbathkeeping for Christians. The Evangelists' unusual coverage of Jesus' Sabbath ministry indicates the great importance of Sabbathkeeping in their communities when they wrote their Gospels (several decades after Christ's death). The Sabbath example and teaching of Jesus provided for those young Christian communities a new meaning to and manner of observing the Sabbath.

How was the Sabbath observed by the Matthean community? The expression used by Matthew, He "entered *their* synagogue" (chap. 12:9; Mark and Luke have "the synagogue"), suggests that his Christian community no longer shared Sabbath services at the Jewish synagogue. Presumably they had by then organized their own meeting places. The distinction in Sabbathkeeping between the Christian and Jewish community appears to have been not all typological, but also theological. The two Sabbath incidents (Matt. 12:1-14) reflect a controversy between the Christian congregation and the Jewish synagogue across the street. Should the day be observed as sacrifice (an outward fulfillment of the Sabbath law) or as mercy (an occasion to show compassion and to do good)?

Matthew's positive humanitarian interpretation of Sabbathkeeping derives from his understanding of how Christ fulfilled the Messianic typology of the Sabbath rest. Viewing the rest offered by Christ as the Messianic rest typified by the Old Testament Sabbath, Matthew presents Christian Sabbathkeeping as a celebration and experiencing of the Messianic redemption-rest by showing mercy and doing good to those in need.

Christians today on and through the Sabbath can experience the Saviour's redemption-rest by sharing with others the creative and redemptive love memorialized by the Sabbath. Being a reminder of the redemption-rest offered to us by the Saviour, the Sabbath invites us to experience the restful assurance of salvation by acting redemptively toward others. □

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> For example, Rudolf Otto writes: "Matthew regarded the words as a Messianic proclamation made in public, corresponding to the later standpoint that Jesus came as the complete Messiah."—*The Kingdom of God and the Son of Man* (Grand Rapids, 1956), p. 235. Cf. William Manson, *Jesus the Messiah* (Philadelphia, 1946), p. 106.
- <sup>2</sup> See also Matt. 8:29; 14:33; 27:54; 26:63.
- <sup>3</sup> For a brief survey of the theme of the Sabbath rest in the Old Testament and in Jewish literature, see *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness*, pp. 135-138.
- <sup>4</sup> 2 Baruch 73:1, in R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1913), Vol. II, p. 518.
- <sup>5</sup> The Testament of Daniel 5:11, 12, in Charles, *op. cit.*, p. 334.
- <sup>6</sup> Gerald Friedlander, trans., *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* (New York, 1971), p. 141.
- <sup>7</sup> Mishnah, Tamid 7:4, in Herbert Danby trans., *The Mishnah* (London, 1933), p. 589.
- <sup>8</sup> Willoughby C. Allen observes that Matthew's intent is to show that "Jesus was the Messiah of the Old Testament. . . . His supernatural birth (Matt. 1:22, 23), several incidents of His early years (2:5, 15, 17, 18, 23), His public ministry in Galilee (4:14-16), His ministry of healing (8:17), His avoidance of publicity (12:17, 19), the misunderstanding of His hearers (13:14), His use of parables (verse 35), the manner of His entry into Jerusalem (21:4, 5), His betrayal (26:24), His desertion (verse 31), His arrest (see verses 54, 56), and the use to which the money given for His betrayal was put (27:9, 10) had all been foretold in the Old Testament."—*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Edinburgh, 1912), p. lxxi.
- <sup>9</sup> For my analysis of Luke 4:16-21, see *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness*, pp. 145-149.
- <sup>10</sup> See, for example, Jean Daniélou, *Bible and the Liturgy* (South Bend, Ind., 1956), p. 226; David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (London, 1972), pp. 209, 210; D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (Grand Rapids, 1982), p. 66.
- <sup>11</sup> For rabbinical references to yoke see, for example, Mishnah, Pirke Aboth 3:5; Talmud, Sanhedrin 94b; Midrash Rabbah, Genesis Rabbah 67:7; Mishnah, Berakoth 2:2.
- <sup>12</sup> Carson, *op. cit.*, pp. 66, 67.
- <sup>13</sup> The term *release* (*aphesis*) is commonly used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew designations for the sabbatical and jubilee years (*shamat*, *shemittah*, *yobel*, *deror*). The same term, *aphesis*, is used in the New Testament almost always with the meaning of "forgiveness." This suggests that the vision of the sabbatical release from social injustices functioned as the prefiguration of the Messianic release from the bondage of sin. For an informative treatment of this question, see Robert B. Sloan, *The Favorable Year of the Lord. A Study of Jubilarial Theology in the Gospel of Luke* (Austin, Tex., 1977), p. 27. See also my analysis of the redemptive function of the Sabbath, in *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness*, pp. 134-145.
- <sup>14</sup> Carson, *op. cit.*, p. 75.
- <sup>15</sup> *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (Philadelphia, 1963), p. 81.
- <sup>16</sup> Willy Rordorf, *Sunday: The History of the Day of Rest and Worship in the Earliest Centuries of the Christian Church* (Philadelphia, 1968), p. 120. Similarly E. Lohse writes: "Matthew 24:20 offers an example of the keeping of the Sabbath by Jewish Christians."—"Sabbaton," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, 1964-1976), Vol. VII, p. 29.